

**Circle of Mercy Sermon**  
**by Missy Harris**  
**October 22, 2107**

**“Whose Image Do You Bear?”**  
**Matthew 22:15-22**

In our text tonight we find unlikely allies, the Pharisees and Herodians (religious and political leaders) joining forces to pose a contentious question to Jesus: *Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?* (Matthew 22:17)

Interactions like the one in this story often have been used to pit Jesus and the Pharisees against each other, saying that the Pharisees (read Jews) were bad and Jesus was good. Over the centuries since these stories were recorded, texts such as this one have been used to justify and reinforce anti-Semitism.

We cannot forget the fact that these interactions occurred *within* the Jewish community in a time when they were trying to define themselves: attempting to claim their identity as they lived in an occupied land that was controlled by the Roman Empire; trying to define what it meant to be faithful to God; and trying to figure out if Jesus was the one who had been promised – was he one they could trust? This was all part of a difficult and sometimes painful family drama being played out communal level, in a very public way.

On the surface, this is a story about taxes. Jewish people in the first century paid many different kinds of taxes – land and temple taxes, taxes imposed upon traded goods. The tax that is referenced in our text tonight is the tax paid to the emperor, the one who ruled the empire that occupied and oppressed the people.<sup>1</sup>

In this story, Jesus seemed to be in a lose-lose situation when the Pharisees and Herodians approached him with their question. If he answered “yes, you should pay taxes to the emperor,” he would have been discounted by faithful Jews and would have had a bunch of angry Pharisees on his hands. If he answered “no, you should not pay taxes to the emperor,” he would have placed himself on the wrong side of the Roman Empire and would have been facing a bunch of angry Herodians, collaborators with the empire that oppressed them.

The spotlight was on Jesus. No matter how he answered their question, he would have been in conflict with one form of authority or another – religious or political. Each group hoped that by backing Jesus into this seemingly impossible corner, that their side might win and walk away justified, having discredited Jesus, which was their collected goal from the beginning of this interaction.

They thought they had him trapped, but Jesus recognized what they were doing. While the Pharisees and Herodians were waiting to see how he would get out of this dilemma they had

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<sup>1</sup> Lose, David. “Matthew 22:15-22,” *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 2, Chapters 14-28*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 2013.

presented to him, which side he would be forced to choose, Jesus subtly reframed the entire interaction and turned the tables on them.

With a simple request: *Show me the coin used for the tax* (Matthew 22:19), Jesus implicated them with their own question. He didn't have a coin. They did. They were the ones tangled up with and participating in the system of the empire that occupied their land and exploited them, that required them to pay taxes to support the ones who caused them to suffer. They were the ones who were trapped, as they carried around evidence of their own divided loyalties in their pockets.

Jesus didn't stop with pointing out *their* hypocrisy made known by their carrying around the currency of the empire. He asked them a follow up question: *Whose head is this, and whose title?* (Matthew 22:20)

When they acknowledged that it was the emperor's head, he simply responded: *Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.* (Matthew 22:20)

If they were paying close attention when Jesus asked them whose image and title was on the coin, the Pharisees would have recognized the intention behind his question, that he was referencing the first and second of the Ten Commandments: *You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.* (Exodus 20:3-5)

I suspect they knew that they were the ones who had been tripped up by their own question. They had approached Jesus, the son of God, asking him if they should acknowledge the emperor, who also claimed to be the son of God, evidenced in the title he stamped upon the money in question.

Ultimately, Jesus didn't really give advice about whether they should pay the taxes or not. His answer made them step out of their – either/or, there is one right way, who's in/who's out – way of thinking. Jesus invited them to think more deeply and more critically about their own question and how they participated in the system of the empire. By asking whose image was on the coin, he was asking them to dig a little deeper within themselves to consider to whom they were willing to pay their ultimate allegiance. Where did their true loyalty lie?

What to do with the currency of the empire and all of the dilemmas and conflicts that came along with it could be used and had been used to divide them. The image and words on the coin were a daily reminder of the empire's attempts to discredit and dishonor the faith of the Jews.

Ultimately, they could divide the money however they chose. But in the realm of their allegiance to God, Jesus had a message that was clear. There were no divisions. All that existed came from God. Nothing existed outside of God.

The emperor demanded loyalty through force and engraved his image and title upon the currency to remind the people of his power over them every time they exchanged money for goods or paid taxes. Let's not forget the fact that they were expected to pay taxes to support their own occupation by their oppressors. But Jesus reminded the Pharisees and Herodians that, ultimately, the image and title of the emperor engraved on the coin diminished them all – religious and political leaders alike.

If the people were listening closely they would have understood that part of what Jesus was doing was reminding them that the emperor was not God. The emperor demanded loyalty to himself. In turn, he only forced oppression and occupation upon them.

Jesus was reminding them that the image of God was engraved upon each and every one of them, even the emperor. They were all created in the very image of God. It was God who showered loyalty *upon them* in abundance and without restraint. God continually sought them out and remained loyal *to them*.

What if we really took this seriously – that the image of God is engraved upon each and every one of us? How might that shape our decisions about how we spend our time? our money? How might it shape our interactions with each other? How might it transform the very thoughts that float through our minds? How might it impact the ways in which we use the power that we do have? How might we use that power differently than the empire uses its power? What would it mean if we were willing to let this reality sink in and shape our lives?

And what if we consider – really consider – that it's not true just for us. We say this, but what if we really believe that it's true for every single person we encounter in our daily lives – the people with whom we vehemently disagree, the people who are leading our country, the people who voted differently than we did. The list could go on and on.

This doesn't lead us down a path of indifference, where anything goes, but it does have the potential to shape who we are – our minds and our spirits and how we engage in the world, who we are with each other and how we relate to God, the one whose image we bear.

Part of what the question from the Pharisees and Herodians points to is our human need and desire to categorize and divide, the question here being: What belongs to us, and what belongs to God? But we know this is a false dichotomy.

We have missed a huge part of the story when we think that we can parse out what belongs inside and what belongs outside the realm of God. It all belongs to God. God requires all of us, every bit of who we are. Yes, we are citizens of the world and we are citizens of the kingdom of God. In both realms, the standard is the same – we bear the image of God; therefore, how we live, how we are in relationship with each other and the world should reflect this image that lives and breathes within us.

When the realm of God's love and mercy and grace seem to be overshadowed or appropriated by the powers and principalities of the empire, when we allow ourselves to be fooled by either/or, there's one right way, who's in/who's out thinking we all lose. We are all diminished.

We find ourselves in a time when the empire is demanding allegiance, when the empire is attempting to force its citizens to stand and proclaim that our allegiance to country either trumps or is equated with our allegiance to God. And it's not just in the visible, public places like the fields of the National Football League. That's where it's easy to identify and point out.

What's harder for me right now is the insidious ways that this message gets into my mind and my spirit: when I find myself being immobilized by hate or fear or just plain being worn out by the constant cycle of news stories; when I begin mirroring the behaviors of the empire; when I take great pains to prove someone else wrong and take great delight when it works (What is it about our thirst to prove ourselves right - to trap someone else in what seems like a conundrum where we hope they will be forced to show their inconsistencies and what they lack?).

When my thoughts and actions toward those with whom I disagree betray any part of what Jesus taught us earlier in the book of Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount, that's when I begin to root my feet in the very thin, shallow places that mimic the values and habits of the empire, that's when I've stated clearly where, at least part of, my allegiance lies. This is when I, too, am caught with my pockets full of coins.

The good news is, that even when this happens – when we are at our worst – when we find ourselves with our pockets full of coins – conspiring with and making deals with the very same currency of the powers and principalities that oppress us, God's loyal and faithful presence is with us, showering down upon us in abundance and without restraint, waiting for us to return, waiting for us to really take in, live into and out of the image that we bear.

Amen.